

Hepburn Shire Council higher cap application

Submission received via email

Date submitted: 10 April 2025

Submission written by: Name withheld

Submission re application of Hepburn Shire Council to increase property rates 10% for fiscal year 2025 – 26

Dear Commissioner, ESC Victoria

I have been a rate payer since 2016 and have followed some of the key investments by council over the years. I am briefly outlining why I believe that the proposed rate rise should not occur.

Request by Hepburn Shire Council (HSC) to raise property rates by 10% in 2025 – 26

In March this year, HSC applied to the Essential Services Commission to raise property rates for the fiscal year 2025 – 26 by 10% above what we are paying in this current year. In my opinion, there is no justification for such a rise that holds up.

As is well known, the ESC has permitted all local councils in Victoria to raise property rates for the coming fiscal year by 3% above what ratepayers pay this year.

Recent history of the REX project

The purchase and renovation of the former Rex Theatre in Daylesford is widely acknowledged as a failure despite some good intentions. An overview / analysis – prepared by the activist group Council Watch earlier this year summarise this very well.

One listed figure from the report is especially noteworthy. \$5.6+ million is the total loss accrued by HSC, an unrecovered hit to the shire budget, after council ended up unloading the property by selling the Rex with its partially renovated interior.

Recently the current Mayor of HS, Cr. Don Henderson issued a public apology for the Rex purchase and renovation. The shire CEO, Bradley Thomas, released a document containing several recommendation changes that are supposed to “protect” HS from involvement in such

projects in the future. The apology from the Mayor and the recommendations from the CEO are generally all welcome.

The question is, have decision makers learned from the past? or are they still performing in a dynamic where everyone is promising each other a certain outcome without checking on the key stakeholders - the rate payers and everyone part of the social fabric of the community.

Fiscal responsibility and value for money

I offer a thought of consideration - It seems that the whole council machine is stuck in the illusion that they need to 'save the world' and cater for everything. And this without checking if rate payers want all the catering! There are basic needs that needs to be looked after and there are many well intended programs at Council. But the balance is not right if not enough funding.

There are so many ways to create community programs/initiatives, and the best often comes from the community itself and not Council. And these initiatives come at a low cost and create mutual respect in the community. You could say that with too high rates people have to work longer to pay rates and in effect it kills off some of the community initiative and ability of the community members to co-create.

I am saying this with respect for all parties in the community, whether working for council or not.

Conclusion

Yes, Council has basic responsibilities for services and beyond. And yes, Council have debt due to past unfortunate decisions.

But to ensure Council decisions makers have learned from the past, it is important to acknowledge that that there must be a fair bit of shrinkage for a while and put a hold non-essential projects for some years. Yes, for example, it would be nice with a bigger library in Daylesford etc. but it works, and I am glad we got one. With a restraint now, I believe the community would come out stronger in some years. Either way there will be some pain. Do we want pain release, or do we want to deal with the cause of the pain? Where is the balance? I believe a big part of the cure is restraint.

In short, in my opinion, there is no justification for a rate rise of 10%

Thank you for considering my opinion.

Kind regards